

Mr. Sock Head tells me that Paramount owns Star Trek. Mr. Sock Head also whispers that A. Decker created Star Traks. However, when Mr. Sock Head insists I write BorgSpace, I feel the need to introduce him to the cat.

< Disclaimer: The following, where possible, has been edited and digitally remastered so that the normal minds of the universe might have a possibility of following a wholly unique worldview.
>

A Borg of a Different Color

Sensors crouched slightly, unhooking herself from the clamps which held her standing during her regeneration cycle. Truthfully, the support was unnecessary as her species never laid down to rest or sleep after entering the subadult stage. The alcove was different in appearance, although not in function, than the others in Cube #347, having a horizontal section which fit neatly over abdomen and a vertical section to snugly cradle torso and head. Before the model had been shipped to the cube, regeneration had been pure torture of unnatural positions. Picking her way towards a local nodal intersection, her four long metallic legs nearly soundless as she stepped along the catwalk, Sensors dove into the harmonies of the sub-collective, beginning her shift.

One of three nonhumanoids on Cube #347, Sensors was of insectoid stock, as were the other two, although none of the three were of the same species. Unlike humanoids, which were rather homogeneous in their basic body pattern, the rarer insectoids came in a wide spectrum of forms. The requirements to be classified insectoid were (1) species lifecycle which included one or more metamorphosis, (2) more than four limbs, and (3) some type of keratin- or chitin-analogue exoskeleton. Although some humanoids (mammalian, reptilian, etc.) may qualify on one or two points, all three conditions were stipulated. Beyond that, anything went.

Sensors' native form most closely resembled a black praying mantis with its four stilt-like walking legs and upright canted torso, granting the abdomen was shorter and the wicked pinchers typical of the Terran insect absent. The forelimbs were spindly and as long as the legs, but whereas the locomotory limbs ended in a two-clawed "foot", a three fingered hand with thumb adorned the arms; in a pinch, however, the arms could serve as a third pair of legs. The top of torso and abdomen were encased in smooth plates, much like a beetle's wing casings, although Sensors' distant ancestors had never developed flight organs. Atop all was the head: a pair of compound-seeming eyes bulged from the skull, providing a nearly circular field of view, while waving from above were a pair of short antennae no longer than the length of the head; the vertical-split mouth hid a set of sharp needle teeth. Overall, the dimensions of Sensors' species was 1.3 meter at head, .9 meter at "shoulder" (intersection of torso and abdomen), and 1.1 meter length.

Several aspects of biology did distinguish Sensors' species from the archetypical Terran insect. First, the exoskeleton, while present, was an extremely lightweight and flexible chitin, resembling the post-molt shell of a crab or crayfish. True, it did serve as a point of attachment for some muscles, but the standard endoskeleton was more efficient. Lungs were also more typical of that found in humanoid species, as the spiracles of the creatures resembled were not conducive to growth above a certain minute size. Four pairs of breathing holes opened under the back plate of the torso, leading to four pairs of interconnected lungs. Unlike the physiology of, say, a human, brachial and tracheal tubes were not shared, and the mouth was solely for eating.

An interesting sideline was that speaking, performed by forcing the air out of the breathing holes over "vocal cords" led to a complicated language capable of words which were literally based of eight different tones sounding together; it made other tonal languages look like the aimless babblings of a baby.

Continuing, it was the unique interpretation of the senses which set the species of Sensors' apart from every other being in the Collective, including other insectoids. The compound eyes were not true, which would have placed an undue metabolic energy demand on the body system, but were instead many simple eyes akin to the orb of a fixed-pupil fish, clustered together in a vast system. /Each/ separate eye took in a whole image, which was reconstructed by the brain into a meaningful picture; however, each eye did not see in the same spectrum. A vast cross pattern in each cluster saw normal visible light, biased towards the red. Seeming to be randomly placed in the area excluded by the cross, eyes sensitive to infrared, single frequencies of visible, ultraviolet, x-ray, and even microwave also gave their input. The visual world of species #6766 was confounding to say the least.

Sensors' species was not only alien in how they saw the world, but how they interpreted it. Both smell and taste figured high in important senses, much more than most species. Receptors on feet and hands allowed a member of #6766 to literally taste his or her way through life, and the sense of smell of the antennae could pick out infinitesimally fleeting scents in the air. The antennae could also feel the air movements of nearby objects, but that ability was evolutionarily underdeveloped. A unique brain integrated all. Neural wiring was malleable, changing and creating new cross-links throughout life. There were no set areas of the brain where perceptions were sorted and categorized; instead the entire input was mixed in the equivalent of a giant blender which when verbalized, other members of species #6766 could easily understand, but others could only scratch their heads.

In other words, even the most advanced translator would alter the phrase, "This flower smells like a rose," into, "This flower [tastes] of [chlorophyll blue nectars] with a dash of [zinging purple whistles]." Some concepts just do not translate...now try to interpret an entire worldview.

From the basic form of her species, Sensors' had been modified by the Borg. All six limbs had been replaced, but unlike the normal clunky prostheses, those designed for species #6766 were slender and mimicked the originals. Tubes wound in and out of torso and abdomen. The head appeared to be half-covered by a black mask which partially obscured the eyes; and while the unaltered lower clusters continued to see normally, the upper half were extensively modified to mesh with the multitudes of optical implants visible on the head. A pair of tubes emerged from the back of the head to trail down lower on the body. Unlike other species, the exterior of Sensors' retained its black coloration, the already dead exoskeleton unable to be partially necrotized in the original assimilation process; a clear liquid had been sprayed on the chitin, rendering it impermeable to vacuum. The unseen Borg modifications were more typical, although little could be done to modify the odd way Sensors, or any of species #6766, interacted with the universe.

To Sensors, the sub-collective was a vast chorus of singing voices, a gallery of battling personalities which warred with each other utilizing weapons of song until harmony emerged from the discord. The computer stored information as tastes and smells, the datastreams of which conveyed sensor information and command codes within a turbid river of unformed potential melodies. After the initial chaos had been sorted and shaped in her mind, Sensors ironically had one of the clearest pictures of both the physical and mental state of affairs of Cube #347.

Sensors took a few moments to observe the interior of the transwarp conduit Cube #347 was currently hurtling through. Hard radiation and subspace fields twisted in the psychotic shadow shapes common to the current mode of transportation. Finding a frequency which focused on the minute stress fractures of subspace, Sensors retuned a large portion of the grid. Many of those awake in the sensor hierarchy immediately tuned out the disturbing sight of five-dimensional fractals, focusing attention on the grid which retained more conventional protocols.

All was well. A slight warping in the fabric of the conduit proclaimed an exit point ahead, but it would be several hours before the end came into view.

Cube #347 emerged at the edge of a system dominated by an aging yellow dwarf star. Minute shifting of the spectrum revealed hydrogen fusion slowly ending, but many millions of years would pass before the star bloated into a red giant. These were the coordinates gained only weeks earlier during a meeting between the cube and species #2553; and, more specifically, Captain's biological kin. The clan had obtained a piece of technology from species #8511, with this was the location where the bartering had taken place.

Miscellaneous planets and space junk orbited the star, the single gas giant showing evidence of extensive past mining of its resources, although no machinery was visible in this epoch. Several terrestrial planets swung through space closer to their primary, and it was there Cube #347 headed at low impulse, long-range sensor envelope fully extended.

Sensors coordinated the sweep of the inner system, overlaying a dozen different frequency visualizations of the same sector of the system. The system had the signs of hard use, one where resources had become vital due to a slowly developed interstellar capability coupled with high population density. Many asteroids showed signs of missing mass due to mining and subsequent development, although none of the habitats were presently habitable. In fact, although there was much in-system movement of ships sporting the warp frequencies of multitudes of species, it was all directed at an orbiting station trailing several million kilometers behind the second planet.

Cube #347 drew closer to what appeared to be the only living target of an otherwise dead or abandoned system. Medium-range sensors came into play, giving the first detailed view of the station.

{Sensors!} shouted Captain into the nets. {Is there any of the grid observing in somewhat normal frequencies?}

{Oops, just a few seconds.} Sensors always seemed to forget that the great majority of those on the ship could not (or would not, it was often suspected) process certain grid configurations which were extremely useful. Gamma [reflections] and [quantum burst wiggles] gave much information on ship type and probable species compliment. Sensors regretfully altered the sensors to track infrared through ultraviolet, as well as set aside clusters dedicated to radio, x-ray, neutrino, and basic subspace harmonic fields. Boring. A small patch, about a quarter cube face, she left in the previous configuration.

A cylinder nine kilometers long and two kilometers in diameter, the unknown station rotated serenely. At first the rotation seemed an archaic method of producing gravity, but gravimetric emissions indicated a standard system of artificial gravity fields to be present. A quirk of the species, then? If so, it was one which accepted the inconvenience of docking platforms that had to be stationary in relation to the station, as evidenced by the multitudes of cradles coming into view in the internal longitudinal axis as Cube #347 swing wide on its approach vector.

Despite the immense size of the internal docking mechanism, it was obviously too small for some of the immense ships which were approaching or leaving the habitat. A row of massive spines, not rotating with the station, served as anchor points for those ships; it was not immediately obvious how crews or cargo were transferred to the station itself, but several methods were known to the Collective and, thus, the sub-collective. Power output indicated several power sources scattered deep in the hull, each of a size more suited to a Federation battleship, and not of a type more typically for a station.

Blinking, Sensors shuffled through the incoming data until she found what had been hinted on another frequency. {Captain! Sensors says that the reactors are warp cores. Very powerful warp cores. Look at the field lines that are produced.} Sensors displayed a simple graphic.

{Can it warp?} asked Captain, perplexed as to why a station, a word which epitomized stationary, would need such power.

{No. The power is all directed inward towards internal systems. No structures indicating warp capability is evident.}

A sigh of relief followed. The station would not suddenly disappear, which would fit in with the luck the cube had been having as of late.

A large communication array studded the length of the habitat, facing the star in a position opposite the external pillions. The last feature of note was the paint scheme of the station: black and silver stripes hundreds of meters wide ringed the rotating section, while the stationary sections looked as if they had been dipped in the essence of blue. The flat end visible to Cube #347 had vast letters scrawled in red, reading in an extinct language, "Station Traxis" and "Always Waiting, Always Watching, Forever Living - Welcome". Interestingly, the latter phrase, when phonetically rendered into an obscure tongue, spelled an obscene cliché of a sexual nature insulting a mythical Creator of the universe.

Cube #347 was now well within sensor range of both station and most of the vessels exterior to its hull. Several undocked ships spun about on thrusters or sped away at high impulse, seeking a place to safely engage warp. Others, however, sedately remained as they were, with the exception of one trader who blew his couplings with a pillion and joined his fleeing comrades.

A hail from the station pinged the hull of the cube, giving Sensors the impression of an unreachable itch centered somewhere behind her eye clusters. She disliked hails...something during assimilation had been bungled, an implant misplaced; Doctor, both present and past drones, always said nothing was different from the schematics of others such as herself, but the annoying sensation always popped up. Cube #347, cautious as it approached unknowing of possible hostiles, had yet to initiate contact protocols. Captain acknowledged the communication, soothing the impossible itch.

Sensors picked the hail from the subspace frequencies, imaging it directly in her brainware. Elsewhere on the cube, a head and shoulders on a neutral backdrop of gray appeared on Captain's viewscreen as the visual component of the message. The head looked much like the stereotypical humanoid, except for the immense amounts of facial hair: a blond yeti in a blue sweater.

"Now, before you begin those Borg proclamations of yours, you should know several facts. One, this station is a freeport, open to all, but if you make the customers nervous, I will use force to rectify the problem. Two, if other customers bother you, I will direct that force at them. Three, this station does, I repeat, does command enough firepower to destroy a Borg cube. Try me, and I'll make sure the debris contain nothing larger than a very small bolt, if that."

The part of the sensor grid which automatically tracked stars when in-system to guard against nasty occurrences such as solar burps, magnetic fluctuations, and other such unhealthy stellar phenomenon, began to register an abrupt twisting of the solar fields, one which could only be artificially produced. Sensors' immediately shuffled through grid frequencies, viewing them in concurrent blocks of ten, until she could see a formerly hidden network of objects orbiting just above the surface of the star. The technology involved to simply keep the machines in one piece had to be amazing, but the fact that thousands of them were in varying orbits and obviously manipulating the magnetic field was astounding. Sensors quickly alerted Captain to the problem.

{Captain, Sensors sees a situation developing. An immense solar flare is building, and it is aimed at us.}

{Aimed?} the incredulous question of Captain was directed at Sensors. She obligingly sent a replay of the image of writhing magnetic fields and plasma.

"Station," returned Captain over subspace, "this cube will...comply." The implied "for now" was evident, even through the Collective voice.

The yeti smiled, "Thank you Borg ship. I welcome you to station Traxis. I am your host, Traxis. I am both dictator of this happy little freeport, and the station itself. As I'm sure you can see, I am what you colorfully refer to as species #5518, one which was assimilated about a century prior. Well, don't get your nanites in a bundle; that species is quite extinct in the galaxy, except within your Collective, I suppose...my body died and I transferred my mind into the systems of the station. You might say I /am/ the station now; I hold absolutely no rancor, as this is the best gig a fellow could wish for. To keep you happy, and to keep you out of my systems, I present you a brief synopsis of how you lost a potential drone, and how I came to be a large rotating cylinder in command of a Borg-detering weapon. When you are done digesting the information, give a yell. I would like to know your reason for this visit and how long you plan to stay. Have a nice day." The speed of data transfer increased immensely, into a rate appropriate for computer to computer. Cube #347 caught the information flow, dumping it into the dataspace for perusal.

Traxis had narrowly escaped the assimilation of his home world, choosing one of infinite directions to point his little trading ship to flee. Alone, Traxis had randomly drifted from one system to the next, learning that none of his species appeared to have escaped, and following tantalizing rumors of a "ghost station" with the abilities to destroy the Borg empire. When he eventually did find the station, all was not as advertised. Orbiting a dead world and belonging to a race tens of thousands of years extinct, the station was a mess. It was amazing it even survived, but the builders had done a good job. Traxis set about to repair the station and move it to a more ship-friendly location, calling in all the favors he had made over the years of wandering, running up huge debts with less-than-legal financial institutions where "interest due" often meant broken limbs, or worse. In the course of repair, he discovered a great secret: a star-based defense system still operational and controlled from the station. However, by this time, any grudge Traxis had with the Borg had long since bled away into acceptance of reality; besides, the weaponry was not very mobile.

Station Traxis opened twenty years after its namesake had fled Borg assimilation, operating as a strategically placed freeport which paid off its debts in less than two years. Anything was legal, as long as it did not endanger the station itself or its livelihood, enforcement of which was carried out by on-station employment of well-paid thugs, a smiling threat of black-listing among the underbelly of society and/or revealment of location to those interested in said trouble-causing party, and the reality of ship immolation. Business boomed.

At the declining age of eighty-three, ancient in the terms of his race, Traxis transferred his personality and mental-self into the systems of the alien station by use of a highly illegal device. In his current reincarnation, Traxis had become his station, continuing management of the freeport which was his livelihood, forever a quasi-god of his own little world, never bored with the constantly changing mass of people.

"Station Traxis," sent Captain.

"Yes?" Traxis had not bothered to send video, had not bothered to drop speeds from the realm in which only computers, or those beings closely associated with computers, could understand.

"This cube is tasked to search for information of species #8511, also known as Jharin. We will be here until we are satisfied with the information we will gain."

"Ooooo...information is expensive, but business is good."

"If you have what we need, you will give it to us."

"Touche, touche. Just for that, I'll tell you that yes, I probably do have what you want...but my price for it became more than you will be willing to pay. You might want to try shopping around on board first; I'll just sit this one out."

"What is the price?" Captain was not used to bargaining, and it showed in the peevish tone which was evident even in the Voice. A response was provided. "We do not think so."

"Told ya. Have fun on Station Traxis. If you need anything, just give a holler...and remember, if you assimilate anyone on my premises or in this system where I can see it, you will be toast." Traxis' disgustingly cheerful signal cut off abruptly.

Sensors was relieve to note the magnetic flux on the solar surface was dissipating.

[Sour yellow mint] twisted through Sensors' perceptions as she felt Captain's frowning disgust in the turn of events. Weapons, as always, radiated a [hotly blue] desire for mayhem, which when combined with the themes of restraint and outright ambivalence wafting in the song made for an inharmonious [crescendo]. The cube was divided over what action to take. Captain was felt to carefully reach over subspace to submerge his voice in the Greater Song. Within that Song, as perceived through the link mediated by Captain, Sensors could hear the voices of others of her kind, relatively few, but joyous; she longed to join, but knew the [discordant] tempo of her thoughts would distract from unity. Still, so raptured was she with simply listening to the give and take of Captain representing Cube #347 to the Greater Song, Sensors almost missed the forthcoming information and subsequent orders which filtered into the sub-collective.

The song of Cube #347 became dominant once more, melody of the Song fading to the background as a constant [swirling backdrop]. Within the dataspaces, Captain fumed over the result of his request for direction from the Greater Consciousness, disliking the outcome, but unable to flaunt the direct consensus/compulsion placed upon the sub-collective.

It seemed there was data about Station Traxis, but the knowledge was kept in deep archives of the Greater Consciousness, unneeded for daily operation as the freeport was located in a sector not scheduled to be brought into BorgSpace for six decades. The threat of other species and governments acquiring the secret of fine-manipulation of stellar fields was considered low, with estimates of the weapon system being overwhelmed and destroyed through an insignificant sacrifice of thirty-four cubes. Final analysis ordered a compliance with all rules as put forth by Station Traxis in the quest to obtain information on species #8511.

Captain briefly considered attempting to break through electronic security measures and simply taking the desired data, but Sensors called an alarm of increased stellar activity as the first levels of encryption were examined. The solar plasma smoothed into the normal indigestions of

an aging star. A new type of action had to be undertaken.

{We will send an away team,} decided Captain after a short shuffling of remaining options. The notion of "away team," although known through assimilation, was foreign: Borg sent drones on specific missions of assault, assimilation, information gathering, and so forth, with each situation directed by specific protocols.

Probability calculations were cross-referenced with station volume, while vicarious knowledge of freeports tipped the odds in surprising directions. Sensors imparted her help, occasionally sending a streamer of yellow to merge with the general consensus; in the end, an abstract sculpture of pea green and [electron subharmonics] rotated in the dataspaces, or at least that was Sensors' perception.

Captain announced, {Twenty shall be sent to gain the necessary data; a random lottery of all drones will be initiated to determine who goes.} Immediately Sensors felt a burst of scents as the computer system tripped its random number generating sequence, flinging out darts of [skunk pencil leads]. One unerringly pierced Sensors' mental signature. A similar smell targeted nineteen other signatures, with varying degrees of enthusiasm present in the subsequent acknowledgments.

Sensors felt the tingle of her molecules being transported; as always, the many shades of green swirled in their abstract patterns, giving her personal amusement as the [tastes] randomly shifted across the spectrum. A new location was slowly built beyond the obscuring emerald haze, one which resolved itself as a large marketplace, stretching in the distance as the deck bent up and away from the horizon. Three other drones also materialized in the same location.

The dataspaces began to integrate a stream of sensory impressions from the five groups of four which had been sent onto Station Traxis. As all perceptions were more or less similar, Sensors ignored the other views in favor of her own.

A series of shops, eateries, bars, and brothels lined both sides of the market - the promenade - with small specialty carts wandering randomly. The wares exhibited ranged from ostentatious displays of flesh to racks of exotic weapons to alcohols and alien foods. People of all sorts and all dress strolled along, actions as diverse as simply conversing with a partner to one being skulking along while brandishing a phaser rifle with paranoid abandon. All was irrelevant.

Loudspeakers rang into life, Traxis' voice making the following announcement: "Attention all patrons! This station relays that Rhak's Weapon Emporium has new stock, and Rhak invites all to examine the updated inventory! Also, Borg from the cube parked outside are now on board. Please treat them by Traxis freeport rules, or you will be harshly disciplined. Remember, Station Traxis sees everything and knows everything. Have a nice day."

The beings, which had more or less streamed around Sensors and her cubemates, suddenly seemed to realize for the first time that the new arrivals were not ordinary freeporters. Silence reined from every quarter of the station, radiating out from the epicenter of the transporter materializations. People shuffled back in alarm or unholstered weapons as Captain commanded the drones to begin their search for information.

Sensors raised herself high on her four walking legs, canted torso forward, then stepped forward towards the boggle-eyed crowd.

Rebuffed yet again, Sensors flicked her antennae in annoyance. At least this being had not run off screaming when she had tried to engage its attention; it had simply stood rigid against a bulkhead wall as Sensors had stated her questions, and it was only through the total silence that she had discovered the being was in a catatonic state. Information stored on the species indicated

the action was a response to extreme stress and fright. Sensors might have been more exasperated if not similar, though less extreme, results had not been the rule among encounters by other drones.

Confrontations tended to follow one of three possible outcomes. One, the being was too scared to be useful, often performing outrageous escapes to avoid the wandering drones. Two, the being, taking advantage of Station Traxis' promise of safety, remained silent in a passive resistance, else goaded the Borg to assimilate them. Three, the being acknowledged that the questions could be answered, but then proceeded to ask an outrageous price up to and often including weapon technology and/or release of entire assimilated colonies from the drone ranks.

No results had been gained after fourteen hours. Captain was actively considering reopening negotiations with Station Traxis. Many examples of bargaining had been observed, although there was problem of setting precedence to consider. Public relations was not irrelevant.

As the increasingly fruitless quest for information continued, Sensors distractedly managed an ongoing task of her hierarchy to catalogue type and configuration of all the numerous ships docked at or orbiting Station Traxis. The station had been slowly circled several times as the survey ground to an end, when a certain sensor profile caught Sensors' attention. She stopped midstep, antennae raising in interest; a pair of scout-transports of #6766, her species, were docked.

{Sensors asks for temporary new priority for search teams,} abruptly sent Sensors. {Find species #6766 crew of the ships Zorcolo and Orange Jagged.} Assent was sent by the nineteen other drones scattered throughout the station.

Five minutes later, 18 of 510 spied the distinctive insectoid shapes of three species #6766 adults ducking into a bar named "Explosive Decompression". Sensors immediately activated the cube's transporter system to change location to 18 of 510's position. This part of the station was less crowded and more darkly lit than other areas, but there was no need for Sensors' to activate light enhancement implants as her unaltered eyes observed her surroundings satisfactorily. She started towards the bar, 18 of 510 following.

The interior of Explosive Decompression was similar to other establishments thus seen on the station: dark with smoke wreaths of what was probably illegal drugs hanging over multitudes of tables. A few waiters and waitresses dully shuffled between wet bar and drinking groups, slave collars winking holographic codes of ownership. Conversations and quiet deals which had been taking place suddenly paused, nervous eyes watching the appearance of the two drones. A large being of no species designation, sporting considerable stature and looking more like a mobile rock than a person, imposed itself between Sensors and the room; the small apron tied around the waist was the only bit of clothing.

"You not allowed in here," rumbled the creature.

Sensors peered up at the 2.5 meter bulk, adding it to the growing file of previously unknown sentients; 18 of 510 scanned the room. The bouncer? barkeep? owner? was of no irrelevant, so Sensors moved to step around...the other drone had spotted the objects of the current search curiously watching from a back table.

"You not enter." A large hand was placed on the front of Sensors' torso, forcefully halting her.

"You will let this drone complete her business," returned Sensors' startlingly melodious and rarely used physical voice; many body parts had been altered during assimilation, but her vocal apparatus had not been one of them. Of the several options open, the one which usually transpired in situations of resistance was banned by Traxis; a quick shuffling of datastreams

showed the surface of the star remained quiescent. It almost felt like the station was watching attentively, which it probably was.

"Puny Borg, you not allowed to do anything to the patrons of Station Traxis, Traxis said so. Boss says to me, 'Hunh, this fine tavern does not need interruptions', so I come to tell you entry is not allowed," rumbled the giant. The glint of a slave collar was evident now, nearly hid in the rolls of granite skin about the neck.

Sensors drew herself up to her full height, which barely passed the top of the apron. Consensus on how to deal with the bouncer without becoming a cloud of superheated vapor was completed, giving Sensors her commands for action. 18 of 510 moved backwards several steps, flattening against a wall.

"Last warning, non-designated species of obviously underpowered brain resources, you will let this drone pass."

"No. I will throw your starveling body across market if you don't leave now."

Hunh lunged forwards, intent to bearhug Sensors' torso obvious. Sensors simply squatted, allowing the arms to whisk over her ducked head, then raised a walking limb, drilling her foot into the meat of the other's shin. As Hunh bellowed with injured rage, Sensors spun on her rear walking legs, body-checking her ridged abdomen into the hurt limb. Hunh crashed to the floor.

Meanwhile, on another level, a swift conversation was happening, namely between Station Traxis and Cube #347. Unknown to Hunh, his fate was decided in the seconds between his initial folly of attack and his abrupt meeting with the floor. Acceptable sentence proclaimed, instructions were received.

Sensors followed her initiative, slamming a fully prosthetic and extremely strong arm against the base of a helpfully presented skull. Hunh went limp, but did continue to live, according to the input of several specialty implants. She had been given permission to terminate the bouncer, but it now appeared to be unnecessary. Sensors delicately stepped up and over the mound of unconscious Hunh, followed by 18 of 510. Excitement over, tavern-goers cautiously went back to their activities, although a sense of cringing anticipation permeated the bar.

Sensors picked her way towards the table with the trio of her species. The three lounged on padded benches which neatly supported abdomen, torsos leaning against a t-bar that stood up at the front of the seats - the species #6766 equivalent of a chair. No overt alarm registered, although antennae quivered in a pattern which Sensors identified as eagerness. Those of species #6766, unlike most other races contacted by the Borg, reacted in a manner fundamentally different from the rest of the galaxy.

At first (survived) contact, when knowledge of the Borg had made it back to the home system, assimilation was not viewed with dread, but as the nirvana promised by ancient prophecies. The life cycle of species #6766 started as egg, then continued through the stages of nymph, subadult, adult, and elder. After elder, the body was discarded and the soul ascended to Heaven, where it took its place as a small voice in a chorus constituting countless sentient species singing of oneness of perfection and waiting for all beings to gather; at that time, the universe would fulfill its destiny, return to its primal form, and explode outward again in the never-ending exploration of the states of idealness. Needless to say, the concept of the Borg Collective seemed like prophecy made reality.

The modern government held a lottery of all eligible subadults, adults, and elders for a pilgrimage ticket to BorgSpace, where the lucky winners would enter nirvana. Only one hundred souls passed into physical heaven each [Home] year, but it was a coveted prize which many spent their entire lives preparing for, in case lottery officials should deliver the golden ticket. The

Borg, although they dutifully accepted each species #6766 pilgrimage ship which entered their space, would actually prefer total assimilation of the species, if only to stop the odd expeditions. Unfortunately, the computers of the ships were as difficult to understand as the thoughts of the insectoid drones themselves, so the precise home system location of species #6766 had never been discovered.

Those nonpilgrims which traveled the space lanes more often than not welcomed the appearance of Borg cubes, happily complying with orders to lower shields and prepare for assimilation. The individuals which risked passage on a species #6766 transport - berths were often priced extremely low - were often forcefully prepared for Heaven in the event of a capture, assured as bonds were tied that being a member of the living chorus was the highest honor to be found in the universe. Thus, with such a totally different worldview, the trio at the table whistled a greeting at Sensors' approach.

"Greetings, holy one. Have you come to claim us to the chorus? If so, we beg a time span of four [races of subatomic bees] so that our crew may fulfill a contract. We will present ourselves for assimilation after that time at a place of your convenience." The insectoid in the middle of the three had stood, bowing her head respectfully forwards. The shimmer of rank paint on her torso identified her as the captain of one of the two scout-transports. "If Heaven cannot wait, then a time of one [moon skip over purple ionosphere curls] will be sufficient for my crew to prepare."

Sensors blew a harmonious triplet of apology from her breathing spiracles. "We are most sorry, but your time of Heaven has not come." The three looked regretful, but also relieved. "Perhaps we shall meet again in the future, and you will sing beside this drone. Instead, we are in need of information, the outcome of which will introduce a new species to the ranks of the singers. Might you be able to help?"

"A new species? One which does not know of Heaven?" A male with the paint of primary cargo officer spoke, disbelief in his voice.

"Yes, one which is unenlightened."

All three shook their heads in sorrowful negation. "Of course we will help, in any way we are able. But..." the captain held up one hand in a gesture of thoughtful pause, "as we are not to be allowed into Heaven, we must have other payment, as pale as it may be when compared to nirvana."

In the back of Sensors' perceptions, groans rose up. Negotiations had been too good to be true. Sensors' hushed those voices which urged breaking of the conversation and resumption of the previous search.

"What is the price?"

The captain sighed, "As it is known, a vile need hangs over certain members of the population of the home system and colonies. Addiction is too strong a word, but true, for the yearnings of precisely manufactured designer chemicals. A market demands products, though, and this small fleet is only filling a hole which otherwise might be plugged by less scrupulous beings, perhaps even those not of our race and unknowing of quirks which might cause metabolic poisoning. It was thought the freeport Traxis might offer a new supply in a competitive market."

It was obvious now the reason for the two scout-transports to be at Station Traxis - drug runners.

"Chemical drugs? That can be easily supplied if you will provide information concerning species #8511, also known as Jharin."

"The grand Borg Collective is not worried about the evils of drugs?"

"Drugs are irrelevant. In the end, there is only the pleasure of the song, which is superior to drugs. You will supply a chemical template, a sample of the substance if available, the amount requested, and all information of species #8511. If it is sufficient, we will give you what you want."

"I am sorry to question, holy one, but how do I know you will fulfill your end of the deal...my two ships can hardly collect if you do not wish to cooperate."

Sensors watched the slightest of ripples pass over the star's magnetic field. "The bargain will be kept; welching is unacceptable."

The information proved to be quite complete, when it arrived half a station day later, much of it obviously gathered and compiled in the previous several hours. Species #8511 was enigmatic, appearing to live somewhere in the vast nebula where Cube #347 had first bodily encountered them. That was the bad news, as the sheer volume of the nebula would entail decades of dedicated searching by the entire Borg fleet, instead of the reality of one very minor cube. The good news was that species #8511 did occasionally emerge from their hiding place to trade or explore, although in the end they inevitably retreated.

The drug - [yellow ants of quantum ceilings] - was simple to produce. The scout- transports sped off with their cargo holds brimming with the substance. Cube #347 was left to brood, slowly orbiting Station Traxis while decisions were made and consensus reached.

The debate came to an abrupt end as Sensors noticed a new warp signature rapidly dissipate, dropping a barbell-shaped ship into the space lanes designated for approach to the station. She felt the combined attentions of the cube suddenly focus on the sensor grid, an inharmonic chorus ending on a staccato note of surprise. As fast as Sensors could flip through the grid alignments to confirm the configuration of the sedately incoming ship, those of the cube swallowed the information. It was species #8511; the moment of pause shattered into shards of shouting.

Captain's presence was momentarily drowned as cycles, if not weeks, of tension was brought to the forefront by the innocent appearance of the Jharin ship, impulse fields oddly bunched as the forward mounted engines pulled its hull along. Sensors felt the [burning cold metal] of Weapons ride his hierarchy through sheer force, the six hundred strong drones lock on the Jharin and instigated the maneuvers which committed the cube to attack. It was that situation which had been initiated when Captain regained propulsion control, but not before a tractor beam had captured the target. Plasma began to churn on the star's surface.

"Borg cube!" angrily sent Traxis. "You will release that trader now or you will not leave this system. I can and will fry you the moment I detect your engines begin power-up; and if you target me, the result will be the same."

The exasperation of Captain at the sub-collective flew through the nets like [frozen methane winds]. The deed had been done, and there was no way to undo the action...it was not allowed for the universe at large to know Cube #347 was acting on its own, and did not always have complete control over its own behavior. Besides, the sub-collective did not want to be swatted over one little ship, as Sensors empathically contributed to the general turmoil.

Communications opened between the station and the Jharin ship. When Sensors inserted a tap into the conversation, it mostly consisted of protestations of the hostile action at a supposedly neutral freeport. Further unobtrusive scans confirmed the intrinsic /reality/ of the vessel, unlike the previous encounter; and no odd warpings of reality appeared to be in effect.

Other parts of the grid continued to monitor an increase in the controlled flux of stellar magnetic fields, cumulating in the formation of a small proto-flare directed at the cube. By the status of the agitated star surface, the weapon could be discharged at any time, in extremely short notice, as forewarned.

Sensors built several dedicated partitions of her hierarchy, task to search for the method of control for the weapon satellites, and possible counters. Captain was still forcing order among the sub-collective, while at the same time trying to delay eminent destruction via a three-way conversation between Traxis, the species #8511 ship, and the cube. So far the winning point of the stalled negotiations was the Jharin's empathic wish to not be vaporized along with the Borg, although Station Traxis was prepared to destroy both on general purposes of avoiding precedence.

Interrupted Sensors into the multitasking, which caused Captain to fragment his mentality yet again. {The additional drawing of both computational and organic processing power taste of [streaming chocolate waterfalls].}

{Yes?} said Captain, as he slightly lessened his personal load by assigning Second the task of retrieving command of a block of thrusters; Delta had physically cut the thrusters functionality by rerouting reaction mass, but the activation codes were still firewalled off by a recalcitrant group of twenty weapons hierarchy units.

{Sensors says we should move this cube directly between the station's communication array and the star.}

{That might block the commands being sent to the weapon?}

{No...physical mass alone will not block the [waves of neutronium billiard balls] which is in use. Besides, we do not have the size to eclipse nine kilometers of array. Sensors suggests raising the stakes - if Traxis destroys this cube, he would also destroy himself.}

Silence, then at the proper point during the following revolution, vectors altered as Cube #347 imposed itself directly between the star and Station Traxis. Impasse; a perpetual stalemated check on the cosmic chessboard.

"Perhaps we might open further discussions?" hopefully asked Traxis as he viciously cut the Jharin ship out of the ongoing dialogue.

Returned Captain, "This cube will listen to the opening offer."

In the end, Captain agreed to allow the species #8511 star to go free. When the tractor beam was released, the barbell shape immediately fled towards the interior docking cradles of Station Traxis, disappearing into the rotating maw. In return, Cube #347 was allowed a graceful retreat from the system, with a promise of severe retribution should the Borg show ever come within sensor distance again. Cube #347 powered up engines and leapt into transwarp.

And almost immediately dropped out again, less than a quarter light year distant, well out of both sensor and weaponry range of Station Traxis. Under Sensors' painfully clear directions (although the others kept complaining of cryptic phrases), sampling pattern was formulated, consisting of jumping to various points of an immense sphere half a light year in diameter, centered on the old yellow dwarf just left. In less than a day, the results were clear.

Building on an anomaly noticed in the signature of the species #8511 warp-capable vessel encountered many months prior, Sensors had embarked on a task to sample [third harmonic essence quark wiggle] in the [fifth phantasmal plane of violet blue]. The taste was similar to that of the nebula species #8511 was supposed to originate from, although there were significant differences. To make matters short, there was a definite trail.

Even without a vital scent, a telling spoor, the wakes of ships through space, subspace, and other media could be observed, even followed with ease, although the signatures of specific ships were impossible to determine until the target came within sensor range. The Jharin ship was not calculated to leave its safety for an unacceptable period of time, and then would probably not travel directly back home. A wise, if inconvenient, decision.

Sensors was proud: the trail made waiting unnecessary. Cube #347 could now backtrack to, and through, the nebula, heading towards the colonies or homeworld of species #8511. Once again, Sensors was vindicated...it was not she who experienced the universe differently, it was the others who could not hear the Greatest Song of All. Oh well, when the final Chorus was built, Sensors' essence would have long been donated to the [fluorescent black raspberries fireworks] of Universal Perfection.